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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 15, Series A (Pentecost 11)
Saturday, August 15th, 2020
Sunday, August 16th, 2020

Sermon: Going to the Dogs

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Focus: All of God's promises find their Yes in Jesus.

Function: That they will persist in prayer, not giving up on God's grace.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "This means that I should be certain that these petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven, and are heard by Him; for He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way and has promised to hear us. Amen, amen means 'yes, yes, it shall be so'" (SC, Conclusion to the Lord's Prayer).

First Frame: The Big Man

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Several weeks ago in the late afternoon, somebody rang the doorbell at church. It was the end of the workday, and I was exhausted. I was ready to go home.

But there was the doorbell and a persistent knock. Through the glass, I saw an enormous man with huge muscles and dark, tanned skin. He reminded me of Shrek, the ogre from the Dreamworks movies, except that he was brown, not green. He wore a sleeveless T-shirt, what we sometimes call colloquially a "wife beater." And, to be quite honest, my first impression of him was to be afraid.

Yet as soon as I opened the door, the big man burst into tears and pleaded, "I need some help!"

"What kind of help?" I asked impatiently. I was all too used to this sort of thing: people phoning or stopping at church with a sob story, asking for money for gas or groceries or a hotel stay. We get calls like this all the time. Many of these people "make the rounds" of the local churches, and I rarely do anything to help other than to offer prayer or point them to the Help and

Hope Center. Earlier in my ministry, I would help anyone who asked. But then I got “had” one time too many, and I don’t like getting scammed. I hate looking silly or stupid.

In answer to my question, the big man launched into a lengthy story about how he and his pregnant girlfriend came from Texas for a job promised in Denver, but he got here two days late, so they gave the job to another guy, and it’s been impossible to find a new job in the midst of the pandemic, so they’ve been living out of his truck, and then she had the baby, and after they got out of the hospital, they’ve been living in the truck again looking for work, but now just this afternoon his girlfriend gave up and left him, literally jumping out of the vehicle at a stop light and leaving him to fend for the baby by himself. And now, *please*, could we help him?

As I said: everybody has a sob story. How would you answer?

I said, “We don’t have any funds or petty cash to help you.”

“I’m not asking for money,” he retorted. “I just need to get out of the heat for my baby to cool down a little. He’s really hot right now.”

The appeal of one father to another for the safety of a child tugged at my heart strings. I looked to Cheryl and Donata, who nodded their heads. The man went back to the truck and came back inside with his newborn, who was wearing only a diaper. His umbilical cord was still clamped and crusty, not yet having fallen off. And the poor, little guy was red in the face, screaming his head off. So at least the part about the baby was true.

“I can’t get him to stop crying,” the father said apologetically, holding out the infant in his massive hands. Cheryl took the baby and nestled him against her chest, laying his head on her shoulder. She shushed him gently while Donata mixed some water with a bottle of formula. As soon as the baby started sucking down the bottle eagerly, he stopped crying.

We really didn't have any cash, but after some phone calls and Facebook posts, we gathered enough groceries, diapers, wipes, and baby formula to get them through the week.

By the time all was said and done, it was about 6:30 in the evening—long after the time I originally wished to be home eating dinner with my family. But I couldn't ignore the big man's need. God opened my eyes—and my heart—and there was nothing we could do except to help. He reminded me what the mission was all about.

The Story: The Canaanite Woman and Jesus

Why do I tell this story, of which *I myself*, very clearly, am not the hero? Because I see remarkable parallels between the plight of the big man and the plight of the Canaanite woman in our Gospel lesson today.

When the Canaanite woman comes seeking Jesus' help, she should know better. After all, she is a descendant of the historic enemies of Israel, but Jesus is a Jew. He is the Jewish Messiah, but she is a pagan who worshiped foreign deities. What business could she have with Jesus? In fact, there was nearby a pagan temple devoted to the Sidonian god of healing.¹

Nevertheless, she comes to Jesus and cries out, "Have mercy on me, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon" (Matt. 15:22, ESV).²

And we are told he answered her not a word (v. 23). What does this mean? Why didn't he answer her? Did he not *hear* her, or did he outright ignore her? We don't know.

But she persisted and followed him, crying out for Jesus to heal her poor daughter. The disciples tried to shoo her away, but she wouldn't go. Finally, they begged Jesus to send her away, as they had earlier urged him to dismiss the crowd of five thousand men because they

¹ *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 1853, note.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

didn't have enough food to feed them (14:15). Perhaps he could just give her a quick wave of his hands as a token blessing and then she would let them be.

But Jesus reminded them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). I am the *Jewish* Messiah, he said, sent to the Jewish people. I did not come for the Gentiles. My mission is not for them. And neither is yours, as he told them in the missionary discourse of Matthew 10 (cf. Matt. 10:5-6).

How can this be? This all sounds rather parochial for the man who would later tell his Church to go and make disciples "of *all* nations" (Matt. 28:19). Why was Jesus being narrow-minded? Didn't he know the Scriptures, that Yahweh's Servant must be a "light to the nations" (Isa. 49:6)? Messiah wasn't just for Israel; he was for the whole *world*!

I read a sermon by one preacher who suggests that perhaps, at least according to Jesus' human nature, he was not yet aware of the wider Gentile mission.³ Perhaps he didn't yet comprehend fully that "God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten son..." (John 3:16). After all, "Jesus was a human being as well as the son of God..."⁴

Yet regardless of *why* Jesus says this, the woman still will not be put off. Falling at his feet, she begs, "Lord, help me" (Matt. 15:25). It's one of the most basic prayers ever spoken: Help me! (*Aside*: Remember the big man at the church door? "I need some help").

But now Jesus speaks the strangest, harshest, most unbelievable words that ever come from the Savior's lips: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (v. 26). Now Jesus, *really*?! Did you *really* have to say *that*?! Did you really have to call this poor, desperate woman a *dog*? This doesn't sound like the Jesus that *I* know!

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Crossing the Line," in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 64-65.

⁴ Taylor, "Crossing the Line," 63.

When Jesus refers to the woman as a dog, it has the same sting of a certain English word for a female dog that rhymes with “witch.”⁵ The Jews did not like dogs. Wild dogs were well known and dangerous (Ps. 59:6). Dogs were unclean, eating trash and corpses in the street and on the battlefield (Ex. 22:31). The Jews of Jesus’ day did not keep dogs as pets. Dogs didn’t sit on their laps or get presents on their birthdays. Dogs were dirty and despised—just like the Gentiles (cf. Rev. 22:15). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus even said, “Do not give dogs what is holy...” (Matt. 7:6).

But nothing can deter this woman from getting help for her daughter—not even Jesus calling her a cur, a mangey mutt. At least she catches Jesus in his own words. She may be a “dog,” but he has thrown her a bone, and she seizes upon it: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table” (v. 27). Even the dogs get the crumbs and eat the leftovers. She’s only asking for a crumb, a tiny morsel. Surely, Jesus can spare her that. Certainly, the Jewish Messiah has enough power and mercy leftover for the Gentiles to at least have a crumb—perhaps even twelve baskets full (cf. 14:20).

Jesus is astounded! Despite all his attempts to rebuff this woman, she will not be bounced out of the kingdom of God. She refuses to be dismissed. She will not be told to shut up and go away. She loves her daughter so much, that she is willing to do anything for her child, even debase herself before Jesus like a dog begging for crumbs.

And Jesus finally caves. He *gives in!* “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire” (v. 28). Just a chapter earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus chided his disciple Peter as being one of “little faith” (14:31), but this pagan girl from the wrong side of the tracks he praises for her “great” faith! This reminds me of Jesus’ earlier encounter with a Roman

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 178.

centurion, at whose faith Jesus marveled and said, “I tell you, not even in *Israel* have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9). The Jewish disciples struggle to believe, but the Canaanite woman persists in prayer. And Jesus gives her what she asks: “Her daughter was healed instantly” (Matt. 15:28). She didn’t give up on Jesus, so he gave in to her prayer.

Second Frame: The Big Ask

So what do we make of this Gospel lesson? What is the “takeaway”? Are we to believe that if we just pray long enough and believe hard enough, God will give us whatever we ask? Like the Canaanite woman, if we just wear Jesus down with our obnoxious outcry, will he eventually give us what we ask just to make us shut up and go away? That’s what it sounds like! But doesn’t this interpretation border on the “name it, claim it” theology of the so-called prosperity gospel of Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyers—which is no gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-7).

Martin Luther wrote a sermon on this Scripture passage, in which he declares: “This is a wonderful Gospel lesson.... From it we are to learn that nothing, not even the throes of death, must deter us from calling upon God in prayer—even though he has already said ‘No.’”⁶ In other words, according to Luther, we should never take “no” for an answer from God. Instead, like the Canaanite woman, we must press on and persist in prayer until he finally grants our petition and answers “Yes.” To that, Luther adds Jesus’ promise in John 14: “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13). This certainly accords with what Luther encourages in the Small Catechism, where he urges us to pray “with all boldness and confidence... as dear children ask their dear father” (SC, Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer).

⁶ Martin Luther, “Reminiscere Sunday—Second Sunday in Lent” (1534), in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, vol. 1, ed. Eugene F. A. Klug, trans. Klug *et al* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 321.

But what if God's answer really is *no*, as one of our homebound members asked me earlier this week? What if I pray for my mother to wake up from her coma, but she doesn't? What if you pray for your husband or wife but be healed of cancer, but they die? What if we beg God to spare us from unemployment or foreclosure or eviction, but we still lose our job and get turned out in the streets? What if you ask for God to bring your wayward children back to church, back to faith, back to relationship with Jesus Christ, but they don't? Does that mean we weren't bold enough, persistent enough? Did we not have enough faith to be worthy of the things for which we ask? Or does it mean that God isn't big enough or strong enough to do what we ask? Maybe he just doesn't care. Is that where we're at? Is that what it all comes down to?

What if I can't answer my own questions?

Or maybe, if it's clear that God isn't going to give us what we ask, we ought to just have the humility to instead pray, "Thy will, not my will, be done." For while we wouldn't give our own children a stone instead of bread or a snake instead of fish to eat, nor do we also give them everything they ask. I don't feed my children candy and soda instead of bread and meat. Not everything we want is good for us. Not everything we *think* we need is truly a necessity. "Father knows best," as they used to say. Certainly, the *heavenly* Father knows best for us Christians.

But the Canaanite woman didn't give up. Even when Jesus' hand was closed to her, she kept at him until he opened his arms just wide enough to embrace her and her daughter's need. "You won't get a thing out of me unless you pry it from my cold, dead hand." So that's what happened: Jesus had to die. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Faith works like a lever on [Jesus], opening his arms wider and wider until there is room for the whole world in them, until

he allows them to be *nailed* open on the cross.”⁷ And there on the cross we find the answer to all our prayers. For whether God’s answer is yes, no, wait, or complete silence, sometimes we must realize that God himself *is* the answer.

So how do we pray? Do we keep praying, refusing to accept God’s silence or refusal? Or do we humbly submit to whatever his will may be? Yes! Yes... what? *Yes!* The answer to both questions is YES! We pray with boldness—and humility! It’s another Lutheran paradox, another “both/and” of the Christian life. We pray without giving up on God at the same time that we honor his good and gracious will that surpasses all understanding. We say YES to both kinds of prayer because “all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20a). All the promises of God find their “yes” in *Jesus!* And all things work together for good for those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

Right now that’s hard for me to believe. What I see with my eyes and perceive with my brain does not always line up with what I believe in my heart. Sometimes my entire experience and all my senses rage against what the Word tells me: that God is good, that he is for me, and that he is with me. But, thanks be to God, we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). Feelings are fickle. Our brains play tricks on us. Our senses deceive us. But faith looks to God in prayer—looks to Jesus—and refuses to look away from the bloody horror of the cross or turn away from the silence. At the foot of the cross, we cry, “Lord, help me!” And he does. Yes, he does. For “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master’s table” (Matt. 15:28).

[*Gesture to altar.*] In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Taylor, 65.